2003

Review of: Machinal by Sophie Treadwell staged by The Hypocrites at Chicago Dramatists

Sara Freeman
University of Puget Sound, sfreeman@pugetsound.edu

Citation
Freeman, Sara. "Review: Machinal, staged by The Hypocrites at Chicago Dramatists." Theatre Journal 55.3 (October 2003): 532-533.

Machinal by Sophie Treadwell
Review by: Sara Freeman
Theatre Journal, Vol. 55, No. 3, Dance (Oct., 2003), pp. 532-533
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

converge upon him, Murray's Pius refuses to compromise and seals his own fate. Murray conveys the suffering of the Pope in a dignified and moving manner that never becomes mawkish.

Randy Graff's portrayal of Marianna Mortara is poignant but not sentimental. Graff becomes defiant when urging the audience to accept her version of the story and uses charm, intelligence, and wit in her futile struggle with Pius IX to secure the return of her child. The problem for Graff (and by extension, the play) is that her character is no match for Murray's Pope. The character becomes an iconic figure of suffering motherhood that is not developed further. Ultimately, this creates an imbalance between the character of the mother and the more flamboyant gripping figure of Pius IX.

Alfred Uhry's *Edgardo Mine* is an important work that popularizes a little known but critical event. The drama quite neatly incorporates the struggle for narrative primacy into the structure of the piece. The play, however, is still a work-in-progress. In addition to the dramatic imbalance between the two main characters, the production suffers, at times, from both a sense of hesitancy and awkwardness. Nevertheless, the incredible details of the story and Brian Murray's tour de force performance make *Edgardo Mine* compelling theatre. It will be interesting to follow the evolution of the piece as it moves to other regional theatres and eventually to New York.

EDWARD ISSER
College of the Holy Cross

MACHINAL. By Sophie Treadwell. The Hypocrites at Chicago Dramatists, Chicago, Illinois. 1 February 2003.

Mechelle Moe is an odd looking actress. Small, pale, with tiny close-set eyes peering below her stiffly styled wig, she shrinks onstage only to shoot a raspy melodious torrent of words that mount toward the expressionistic *shrei* that lurks below the text of *Machinal*: "I will not submit." Moe must be watched, yet she can be unbearable to hear. Accompanied by an onstage cello player echoing her voice, Moe courted and assaulted the audience—plaintive, aggressive, unceasing in struggling with the society/machine that consumed her.

Moe's performance was ideal for The Hypocrites—an intense, irreverent, migratory Chicago theatre group headed by polymath director Sean Graney. The Hypocrites' trademark is a maniacal take on theatrical classics, and this fervor served *Machinal* honestly. The text is a cry of anguish about women's dehumanization at the hands of parents, job, husband, and children. Sophie Treadwell's 1928 drama is not yet treated as a canonical classic. However, it is a breakthrough American assimilation of the European avant-garde. Treadwell's absence from traditional theatre history reflects gender bias more than an objective judgment. Based on an actual court case Treadwell covered, *Machinal* premiered on Broadway in 1928. It was a hit there and in London, where it was titled *The Life Machine*. *Machinal* was a forgotten text until a series of revivals occurred in the 1990s. The 1993 production at the Royal National Theatre, directed by Stephen Daldry and starring Fiona Shaw, was a sensation. Daldry created a machine ballet in the vastness of the Lyttelton performance space. It featured an enormous cogs-and-wheels set for the opening office sequence and a haunting placement of the "Domestic" scene with furniture sitting mid-air atop massive poles.

The Hypocrites had a much smaller pool of resources. However, their vision which encompassed the physical, visual, and emotional world of the play, was as visceral as Daldry's. Graney framed the different boundaries of each episode's playing space with simple moveable panels, onto which he projected video images, which often adumbrated the actions of the subsequent scenes. Images of rats gave way to the "Domestic" setting in which a gaudy, formal portrait of a rat completed the drawing room decor; before the "Maternal" episode in which Helen refused to see or nurse her baby daughter, the video ended with a mechanized assembly line of milk cartons that moved in robotic rhythm across the screens. The synchronization worked so well that, as the screens rolled back, it looked as if the conveyor belt extended into Helen's space.

Perhaps the most stunning moment in the show came in the "Prohibited" episode when Helen accepted a cigarette and allowed her prospective lover to light it for her. In a chain reaction that took only seconds to unfold, every other actor in the crowded bar scene lit a cigarette for someone else. In a flash, the entire ensemble, which had just previously been involved in background hubbub, was coolly smoking a cigarette and eyeing Helen—or were they eyeing us in the audience? The thrilling effect of this was to make Helen's gesture echo, thereby forcing the audience to remember later how she began on the path that led to the murder of her husband.

Mechelle Moe as Helen in *Machinal*.
Photo by Sarah Hadley

Helen's plunge into forbidden love and freedom was counterpointed in the "Prohibited" episode by overlapping vignettes of temptation, seduction, and trespass. Graney then staged the "Intimate" episode with a superlative use of space and focus. While the costuming and lighting of the rest of the show emphasized red and black (though Helen was always in navy blue), this scene was washed in blue and white. A cheap painting of a waterfall rigged to light up and emit the sound of rushing water hung beside the bed. The tackiness of the painting belied its gloriousness: it was the brightest, happiest image onstage all evening, and Moe's Helen was enraptured by the image and calmed by the sound.

The luminous glowing waterfall offered Helen the first and only repose of the entire production. Other scenes, especially the "To Business" episode, were busy with sound and movement to the point of hysteria. One could understand how she would kill to regain that peace once more. Graney's direction and Moe's performance maneuvered the audience to sympathize with Helen at the turning point of the story. An early scene between Helen and her mother ("At Home") felt mawkish and unconnected, while the penultimate episode ("The Law") suffered from histrionics of young and unfocused actors. The final episode ("The Machine") exhibited a perfect austerity. This was achieved with a simple lighting effect indicating Helen's execution in an electric chair. The end of her journey from the life machine to the death machine was devastating.

For all its stunning images, the Hypocrites' production of *Machinal* was marred by the company's high-energy and exaggerated house acting style, which seemed to be intensified by Expressionist art. Graney's program notes commented that: "looking at expressionist paintings, I noticed strict black lines and solid colors. The strokes are all deep and purposeful. This is how I read *Machinal*. In directing, every choice was made to the strictest possible level. This allows little subtlety." Bold coloration, intense acting, and strong demarcation of space and movement defined the Hypocrites' *Machinal*. Though lack of subtlety is sometimes hard to sit through, this production was so energetic, wild, and inventive that the final feeling was exhilarating.

SARA FREEMAN
Illinois Wesleyan University

NO FOREIGNERS BEYOND THIS POINT. By Warren Leight. Center Stage, Pearlstone Theater, Baltimore, Maryland. 27 November 2002.

Based on his experiences in China in the early 1980s, Warren Leight's new play, *No Foreigners beyond This Point* is the story of two young American idealists and their six months together as teachers at the Da Lang Foreign Trade Institute in southern China. Though Andrew had a crush on Paula in high school, they barely knew each other when they traveled together to China. Andrew accompanied Paula chiefly as a pretext to get close to her. The play is in part about their burgeoning relationship. However, *No Foreigners beyond This Point* is a highly ambitious undertaking. In addition to tracing the relationship between Paula and Andrew, the play deals with, among other things, their negotiation of life in China in 1980, Chinese ideas about education and America, and the effects of China's Cultural Revolution. The play opens in the present with Andrew struggling to reconstruct what actually happened in China. Later we learn that he is addressing the Chinese daughter he will soon adopt. He is collecting letters, journal entries, and (he hopes) photographs in order to explain the profound impact China had on him.

The scenery consisted of a series of monolithic L-shaped wall units which rotated and re-formed to create various locations at the Da Lang Institute against a background of Chinese landscape painting, framed by a false proscenium of brick and ironwork. Sharp-edged rectangles of light illuminated a rectangular forestage and provided small, clearly defined acting spaces. Consequently Andrew and Paula were constantly confined as they became simultaneously surrounded and lost within the vast expanse of China. This metaphor of confinement resonates throughout the play. The movements of the two Americans are carefully restricted—both for comfort and convenience. The